

# OPEN AND SHUT?



Photo by Apichittha

January, February 20, 2016

## The QA Interviews: Kamila Markram, CEO and Co-Founder of Frontiers

Based in Switzerland, the open access publisher Frontiers was founded in 2017 by Kamila and Harry Markram, who are both neuroscientists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne. Kamila Markram is also director of the Human Brain Project.

A researcher-led initiative conceived as being “by scientists, for scientists” the mission of Frontiers was to create a “community-oriented open access scholarly publisher and social networking platform for researchers.”

To this end, Frontiers has been innovative in a number of ways, most notably with its “collaborative peer review process”. This aligns the traditional hierarchical approach to editorial decisions in favour of reaching “consensus” decisions. In addition, papers are subject to an “impact-oriental” way – while expected to direct an objective threshold before being publicly evaluated as a correct academic contribution, their significance and impact are not assessed.



KAMILA MARKRAM

Frontiers has also experimented with a variety of novel publishing formats, created a top – a “research network” intended to foster and support open science – and presented a timeline before the facts had been sorted.

Two other important components of the Frontiers’ concept were that it would operate on a non-profit basis (via the Frontiers Research Foundation), and that while it would initially have article-processing charges (APCs) for publishing papers, this would subsequently be replaced by a recurrent funding model.

This latter goal has yet to be realised. “We dreamed of a zero-cost model, which was probably unrealistic and it was obviously not possible to start this way”, says Kamila Markram today.

Frontiers also quickly concluded that its non-profit status would not allow it to achieve its goals. “We realised early on that we would need more funds to make the vision sustainable and it would not be possible to secure these funds through purely philanthropic means,” explains Markram.

Consequently, in 2018 Frontiers restructured itself as a for-profit publisher called Frontiers Media SA. It also began looking for additional sources of revenue, including patent royalties – seeking, for instance, to patent its peer review process by means of a controversial patent method patent.

The patent strategy was also short-lived. “We abandoned the patent application by not filing any notice by the specific deadline given by the patent office and deliberately left this,” says Markram, adding, “we even

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publish that it either hasn't just so long, implying that those who's work on a project." (Many Marlowe researchers estimate an end to print editions)

By the time the peer review process had died it was too late to suggest that Frontiers' peer-to-peerish model was working well, in fact, business was booming, and in 2016 Frontiers had published around 11,000 papers by 131,000 authors. It has also received 29,000 citations, and currently publishes 24 journals. By 2011, the company had named "rank position" (Cite score) when it was founded.

## Successes not unrefined

Frontiers' success has not go unnoticed. Not only did it quickly gain visibility amongst researchers, but it began to attract the attention of publishers, not least Nature Publishing Group (NPG), which in February 2017 announced that was entering into a relationship with Frontiers.

The exact nature of this relationship was, however, somewhat unclear. As its press release has described this as a "strategic alliance" the associated news item in Nature reported that Frontiers had been "swooped up" by NPG, which was taking a "majority investment" in the company.

A post on the Frontiers web site also talked of NPG taking a "majority investment", and quoted an approving Philip Campbell (Nature's Editorial Chief) saying, "Frontiers is pioneering in many ways that are of interest to us and to the research community."

In reality it was Heidelberg Publishing Group that had received the offer, not NPG, although Heidelberg was the owner of Macmillan Science and Education (and thus of NPG).

It was also unclear as to whether the money that Heidelberg had invested in Frontiers could be described as a "majority investment". Speaking to Science in 2017, Frontiers's Executive Editor Frederick Brandt described it rather as a "minority stake".

There was the prevailing sense of Frontiers's relationship with Nature because of its merger in January 2015, when it was announced that Macmillan Science and Education (along with NPG) was merging with German science publisher Springer. There was no mention of Frontiers, and the situation was only clarified when Macmillan posted a reply in response to the question it was receiving about the status of Frontiers.

Looking back, it would appear the much needed relationship between NPG and Frontiers was more with Heidelberg than substance – conceptual perhaps by a glowing *Technique* video produced at the time but (as might other things) include a clip of the CEO of Macmillan Science and Education (and former MD of NPG) *Armin Thoma* welcoming Frontiers in Macmillan's office in London, leading its representatives and promising, but being far specific what exactly Nature planned to do with Frontiers.

The true state of affairs does not appear to have been publicly acknowledged until the 2015 *Science* article about it. When asked to clarify the situation *Textor* replied, "We made the decision about 6 months ago to make a clean separation and come to mention again that [NPG] has some kind of involvement in Frontiers."

## Critics

Like most successful open access publisher Frontiers has attracted controversy along the way. There have been complaints, for instance, about its peer review process (including an oft-repeated claim that its editorial

board is made of five editors is enough to have a letter this year) was divided to discuss and change articles at Technology Review...



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On a superficial reading open access is intended to be as much more than it is, on the one hand, provide an alternative to the scholarly community...



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It's not for nothing that the open access movement is often described as a 'movement' that is not just a set of ideas but a set of practices that are being developed...



FLOS CDO: A new model for open access publishing

The Public Library of Science (PLOS) and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) have today announced a new agreement designed to make...

system does not allow papers to be resubmitted), complaints about the level of "rigour" in reviewing research submitted, and allegations that the circle of reviewing is disproportionately skewed to the favoured by multi-linked connecting company interests. (By the way, too, requiring editors to accept further action within a pyramidal editorial and journal structure, setting editors targets for the number of papers they have to publish in their journal each year, and reporting that they the positive papers in the journal).

There have also been complaints about the way that *Frontiers* promotes itself on its blog. Its posts have attracted considerable attention (including from high-profile media outlets like the *Times* /*Figures*) but critics argue that while its contributors tend to be presented as research the focus is cherry-picked in a self-serving way. See, for instance, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

In addition, *Frontiers* has attracted criticism for publishing a number of controversial papers (see [here](#) and [here](#) for instance), and in 2014 it was accused of seeking to to manipulate *Spill Events* by retweeting a legitimacy given. The issue led to *Frontiers*'s assistant editor [Dawn Hendry](#) publicly [apologising](#).

A number of other prominent researchers have publicly criticised *Frontiers* too. In June, for instance, a [blog article](#) was posted by Dr [Christy Horro](#), Professor of Developmental Neuropsychology at the University of Oxford, and another one a month later by [Nicholas Turner](#), Professor of Digital Humanities in the Department of Information Studies at University College London (UCL).

More recently, in January, [Nick Allott](#), a Cognitive neuroscientist at UCL, released the satirical complaint against *Frontiers* in a blog post entitled "Is *Frontiers* in Trouble?".

But the most controversial incident occurred last May, when *Frontiers* [asked 11 editors](#) to end a row over independence. The editors complained that *Frontiers*' published positions are designed to maximise the company's profits, not the quality of papers, and that this could harm patients.

The wave of criticism reached a peak last October when [Jeffrey Hall](#) added *Frontiers* to his list of "potential, possible, or probable predators including open-access publishers".

## Supporters

On the other hand, *Frontiers* has no shortage of financial supporters, not least amongst its many of editors and authors. It has also received public support from a number of industry organisations.

In a [statement](#) posted in October this last year, for instance, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) said: "We saw that there have been vigorous discussions about, and some editors are uncomfortable with, the editorial processes at *Frontiers*. However, the processes are declared clearly on the publisher's site and we do not believe there is any attempt to deceive either editors or authors about these processes. Publishing is a highly competitive and new models are being tried out. At this point we have no concerns about *Frontiers* being a COPE member and are happy to work with them as they explore these new models."

And a response to questions being asked about the role that *Frontiers*' journal manager [Mirjam Carme](#) plays in COPE the statement added: "*Frontiers* has been a member of COPE since January 2013. In the interests of complete transparency, we now have also this one of the *Frontiers* staff, [Mirjam Carme](#), is a member of COPE council. We confirm she was elected to what she was employed as the *Journal of 30*

What is the Cover Article Publication?

What is the best Cover Article (CA) has its origin in the 2004 *Blackwell Open Access Journals* (MOA), the concept and price set at 100 that time.

## Blog Entries

2014 (7)  
2013 (2)  
2012 (4)  
2011 (2)  
2010 (2)  
2009 (4)  
2008 (5)  
2007 (4)  
2006 (5)  
December (2)  
November (1)  
October (1)  
September (1)  
July (2)  
June (1)  
May (1)  
April (1)  
March (1)  
February (2)  
Why I won't be doing that either  
October 2014  
The COPE statement  
September  
August  
July  
June  
May  
April  
March  
February  
January (1)

2016 (1)  
2015 (5)  
2014 (2)  
2013 (5)  
2012 (2)  
2011 (2)  
2010 (2)  
2009 (4)  
2008 (1)  
2007 (2)  
2006 (2)  
2005 (2)  
2004 (2)

## Followers

International AIDS Society in 2012 and which continued with the agreement of the EAPN Council and on becoming an Associate Member of EAPN) after she moved to Frankfurt, she is now also a member of EAPN."

Around the same time the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) published this statement: "We are aware that concerns have recently been expressed about the publisher Frontiers, which is a member of OASPA. We have discussed the situation with Frontiers, who have been very responsive in providing us with information on their editorial processes and explaining their procedures. In light of these responses, the Membership Committee remains fully satisfied that Frontiers meets the requirements for membership of OASPA."

(We could also be pointing that Frontiers' Executive Editor Frederica Heintz was a candidate for OASPA's Board in 2015)

As will perhaps be evident, a second issue for the complaints about Frontiers are its editorial processes, including the claim that its editors cannot deal with papers to be rejected. Mathews agrees that there has been some confusion over this. While agreeing that reviewers have always been able to reject papers, the administrative helpline that feedback indicated "it was not clear to them how to recommend a manuscript for rejection to the handling Editor."

The issue, she says, has now been addressed. "Based on the feedback we have been receiving this option withdrawn from reviewers' recommended actions, and the reasons, which reviewers can choose from to indicate why, have also been updated accordingly."

David Lisker, an assistant professor at Harvard's University of Technology, has experienced Frontiers as author, reviewer and editor. He has published several papers, and was for some years an associate editor for Frontiers in Cognition, resigning last month due to a lack of time. He continues to act as a reviewer.

Lisker suspects that much of the criticism comes from researchers who have failed to understand, or are not comfortable with, Frontiers' distinctive peer review process.

"The review process itself is much more collaborative. This is a good thing if you find good reviewers willing to spend time in improving manuscripts. Perhaps similar to some discussions, and shared in arguments from the other side, leads to bigger improvements in manuscripts than at traditional journals, in my opinion. But it really depends on the mind-set of the reviewers and authors."

The other important difference, he says, is Frontiers' commitment to publishing methodologically sound research, regardless of significance levels or novelty.

"Publication bias is probably the biggest challenge that modern science faces. I think it is important that Frontiers takes a responsibility in publishing all sound research. Some reviewers, more similar to traditional journals, just want to reject papers they don't like. For example, this happened when I submitted my own article in Frontiers, where a reviewer thought there was nothing novel (a my explanation of effect sizes) and withdrew from the review process. It would have been better if this reviewer had instead provided some suggestions to improve a (which was not direct possible), because the rather substantial increase in the article (I had been told 100+ times) suggests his judgement about the quality of the paper seems to have been incorrect."

Lisker is also sceptical about claims that it is not possible to reject papers. "Every manuscript I submit is rejected as a Frontiers editor has been

Frontiers (2019) 12(1)



Frontiers



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rejected.”

## Radical when it started

Lukersmith: “Frontiers was radical when it started and paved the way for other more radical open access journals. The collaborative review process is still in many ways novel and, very often, an improvement over the traditional peer review process. But now we see even more innovative journals than Frontiers emerging. One example is *PloS*1, which greatly reduces the cost of open access publishing, and also makes open reviews.”

In 2016, Impact Factor® (now being phased out by JCR®) was 2006, a year before Frontiers appeared on the scene, but (as said in Lukersmith’s statement, I think, in a letter that while it has played an important part in promoting both types of peer review, Frontiers’s own track record with *PloS* journals, most innovative, and have impressive publications like *PloS*1 and *PloS*2 research.

It is very well to help that, but I have added Frontiers to the list, which Lukersmith could encourage researchers to check the publisher. “Many scientists are reluctant to provide, and if their institutions would not be able to evaluate the quality of science themselves, they might look more about submitting to Frontiers, although I would hope this group is rather small.”

But, of course, it is not a continuous process, and the list is widely criticized by some active reviewers. “I think David’s list is not transparent,” says Lukersmith. “Inclusion is not, simplified, and based on the basis of the personal opinion of a single individual. The scientific community should question David’s list, and pay more attention to the *Journal of Open Access Research* (although we list and the perfect). I think Frontiers should also exist in its own right, but not in its own right, there is always room for improvement, but I don’t think David’s list falls on the category of ‘total rejection’.”

It is indeed remarkable that the decision of a lone Director sitting in a Cambridge library could have a significant (and good) impact on a publisher. This has come of this, in December Frontiers of *Journal of Open Access Research* is now with David and try and persuade him to take Frontiers back off his list – apparently without success.

Underlying all this, of course, is the fact that the emergence of the Internet has triggered manifold controversies within the research community. Above all, it has plunged scholarly communication into a period of considerable upheaval, and put individual views of being things under growing pressure, not least evidenced by the fact. The cost of publishing research papers is a further source of controversy – and open access publishing has amplified both issues.

A key question here seems to be how publishers find an appropriate role for themselves in the emerging new landscape. In the Q&A before Matheson says that “disrupting all control on the Internet, unchecked, in multiple versions of content, and as cheaply as possible, is not a service of anyone”.

Many, if not most, would doubtless agree with this, which would seem to imply a continuing, guiding role for publishers. But what does publishers should be, exactly what kind of service they should provide, and what they should charge for that service remains unresolved.

On the issue of costs, Matheson notes that under the traditional subscription system it costs \$7,000 to publish an article, a figure that may

that 104 publishers have reduced to around £2,000, and Frontiers to just £4,100.

I am sure many would challenge these figures, but I will finish with two (rhetorical) questions: First (bearing in mind the issue of whether peer-review papers will be asked to order to bulk up CVs should in fact be broadly published), if the average rejection rate at Frontiers is (as Martinson says below) just 33% (i.e. 67% are accepted), and if some of those articles have not even to have met Frontiers' lower threshold for publication. As Martinson points it, "no peer-review is better than no peer-review", so problematic articles might be able to get through if they does 11,100 (or £2,000) per paper represent good value for money? Second, how high does the acceptance rate need to go before simply dumping papers on the Internet becomes a logical way for the research community to save itself millions of dollars a year?

To read Marking's detailed response please click on the link below. There are two pdf file provided by this introduction.

Below should be aware that the Q&A is long. I have chosen not to add Martinson's text and there are some repetitions, but I was keen to allow him to address my questions to his own words, and as fully as the felt to be appropriate. I have, however, made ample use of quotations.

END

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